

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 12
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 22

July 2008

The Supreme Choice

CISR JOURNAL

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

JOURNAL, CISR (2008) "The Supreme Choice," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol12/iss1/22>

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THE “SUPREME” CHOICE

In August 2007, the Humpty Dumpty Institute named a new spokesperson, Mary Wilson, famous to many for her performances with the popular vocal group The Supremes. Wilson has taken up her new responsibilities with zeal, representing HDI on a trip to mine-affected areas in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Sri Lanka. Wilson took time to talk with the *Journal of Mine Action's* Daniele Ressler. This profile is the result of that interview.

by Geary Cox [Mine Action Information Center]

based on an interview by Daniele Ressler [Mine Action Information Center]



Mary Wilson performs at a benefit concert in Sri Lanka.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF HDI

Having performed hundreds of concerts for packed arenas in her lifetime, Mary Wilson took a decidedly personal approach when agreeing to sign on as spokesperson for The Humpty Dumpty Institute. “I really feel, as a parent and grandparent, that these [explosives] should have been taken care of many years ago,” Wilson says. She adds that although landmines and other explosive remnants of war are fairly simple devices, their complex impacts on communities around the globe demand immediate remedy.

Getting Started

Wilson began her advocacy work in earnest long before her affiliation with HDI. In the past, Wilson has done work with the homeless and the incarcerated, lecturing in jails around the United States. Besides charity work during and after her time with The Supremes, Wilson was asked by former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to serve as a cultural ambassador with the State Department’s CultureConnect program. Wilson says Powell appointed people from different capacities in the arts who then traveled, “reaching out and helping people from different areas.”

Wilson visited universities in India and Pakistan, giving lectures and answering questions about her music career and the arts in general. In Africa, Wilson visited schools to engage with people there on culture and to discuss the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While visiting schools in South America, Wilson lectured and had the opportunity to observe local art with students. She says that the “exchange of cultural experience[s]” through the program was enjoyable, especially being able to learn about the students’ interests in local art.

The opportunity to serve with HDI arose out of connections made through the U.S. Department of State when the CultureConnect program ended, Wilson says. Looking to strengthen landmine awareness, Wilson adds that she was interested in the HDI position as a way of augmenting her own work: “It was a continuation of what I had been doing, but on a higher level.” Wilson adds, “Princess Diana was a spokesperson for the landmine issue [though not as the HDI spokesperson].” Following in the footsteps of Princess Diana, Wilson says that she met with HDI and “realized that this is definitely something that I could be involved in.”

Working in Sri Lanka and Lao PDR

Work with the Humpty Dumpty Institute began quickly. Wilson traveled in November 2007 to Sri Lanka and Lao PDR to raise money to remediate and improve awareness of the problems posed by landmines

and other explosive remnants of war. “In Sri Lanka,” Wilson says, “my band and I gave a benefit concert to raise money for various organizations. One was for disabled veterans who had been hurt by landmines.”

While also in Sri Lanka, Wilson and her band visited a government-built village for veterans, bringing awareness to the problem of landmines as they traveled. The group was supposed to visit the northern city of Jaffna, where HDI has its field operations, but that visit was canceled because of renewed conflict. In fact, she says, “We planned to visit many of the mined areas and speak with the people who work there ... but we couldn’t because the fighting was intense.”

After their time in Sri Lanka, Wilson’s group went to Lao PDR to visit with children who had been affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance. They planted fruit trees around the perimeter of a school, which will soon produce fruit for the schoolchildren to eat. They also undertook other beautification tasks at a local school to make it more enjoyable for the local children, many of whom had been unable to get to the school because of UXO. The United States Department of Agriculture also sponsors an HDI feeding program at the school, “so they have food for the children when they come to the school.” Wilson adds, “It’s an [incentive] to get the children to come back to school. Many times, they [don’t] go back to school because parents don’t make them ... or they are afraid.”

Wilson also had the opportunity to see controlled UXO explosions. “That was pretty exciting,” she says. The experience was “bittersweet,” according to Wilson, because villagers had to evacuate their homes while experts swept the area for additional explosives. More bombs were found, even in areas used daily by the local villagers. “In one area, the bombs were in the latrine. ... The guys had to [go] down into the latrine to get them out.”

Taking Landmine Advocacy Further

Following her trip to mine-affected areas in Sri Lanka and Lao PDR, Wilson’s perspective on the dangers of landmines changed. “It was a very exciting trip for me and it just shows that we can’t all have ideal lives when things like that are going on. ... There are still basic things that we need to do to make this a wonderful planet to live on.”

Part of her work as HDI’s spokesperson includes sharing her experiences in such areas. Wilson says HDI is especially important to mine action and local development because its organizers “don’t just go in with their people and do all this work. They train the people who live



Mary Wilson with children of landmine victims.

in the area on how to do these things ... so that they can continue the effort themselves later on." Developing local capacities is vital because "the villagers would find [UXO] and try to remove or sell the bombs for scrap metal, as money is needed badly. That's how a lot of villagers, especially children are maimed." Now, Wilson notes, local people living in the areas have the long-term benefit of training and "know that they are part of the clean-up ... of the landmine situation."

Wilson hopes that her new role with HDI will inspire others to take an interest in mine action: "People say that the world has bigger problems, ... but when you think about this happening, it's very sad. We have forgotten about people."

In addition to advocacy and travel on an international scale, part of Wilson's job as HDI spokesperson includes advocating for the organization and its work to governmental agencies in America. As an HDI representative, Wilson has already attended government meetings like the USDA's International Food Aid Conference² to speak about the effect landmines have on agricultural development and to promote the USDA's growing role in this issue.

After many years of doing charity work and working to raise awareness of various social issues, Wilson says she is glad to help promote awareness of HDI and the global scourge of landmines. The urgency of the issue, she says, cannot be addressed solely by one person: "I think we should all get involved in certain issues that perhaps do not even touch us but are meaningful to human life." ♦

See endnotes, page 112

Daniele Ressler of the Mine Action Information Center interviewed Mary Wilson on 14 January 2008. Joseph Keane assisted with research and preparation of this article.

"Putting the pieces back together" is the slogan of the Humpty Dumpty Institute, an organization that deals with difficult humanitarian issues by improving the relationship between the United States and the United Nations, supporting international mine-action programs, and fighting domestic and international hunger. HDI currently operates programs in Lao PDR, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

The Lao PDR project is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole Food for Education program, and HDI has partnered with International Relief and Development and Mines Advisory Group to carry it out.³ Through the US\$2.95 million granted in 2006, schools in 50 villages in central Lao PDR have been cleared of UXO.³ The funds are also used to feed 10,000 Laotian children every day, create gardens and rebuild schools.²

The Sri Lanka project is funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food for Progress program.³ HDI has partnered with Land O'Lakes, Inc. and The HALO Trust. The mine clearance and revitalization of the local dairy industry are being financed through the profits of selling \$4 million worth of donated red lentils and soybean oil mix to the local population.³ The project is focused on the northern district of Jaffna.



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